

Until the iPhone, access has been a luxury. It is unconscionable that in a society which is becoming more techno centric with every passing day, those who cannot utilize the dominant modalities for accessing and sharing information should need to literally purchase their rightful participation in the culture. While it may be difficult to quantify consumption of cellular technology and service as a right in any direct way, it is easy to see why it should be treated as such. Today's society operates in a paradigm dictated by our collective need to access and share information at any time and from anywhere. To effectively relegate those needing to access and share information through alternative means to a subclass - one whose membership is determined by an individual's ability to provide or secure money to purchase their participation in that paradigm - is to enact a system in which equality is an exclusive privilege. It is unethical and unconstitutional. If our unalienable rights as American citizens are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then it follows that the ideal manifestation of this is for there to be as few barriers to all citizens to pursue these things as possible. Unless an individual can access and share information using the modality that best serves him/her without incurring additional cost or being forced to settle for an unequal level of functionality, the individual does not enjoy the same rights, in practice, as their non-disabled peers. His/her participation in the social, economic, informational, academic and employment facets of life in our society and culture are limited; their experience is not truly equal, and it would seem that their basic rights as Americans are inalienable, as long as they can find - or afford - a work-around.

I began using cell phones in 1997. Until the emergence of Apple's iPhone and my purchase of one, I had never experienced the full range of functionality offered to my sighted peers by the cellular phone as it evolved. My use of whatever model I owned at any given point was limited to the most basic - receiving calls, albeit without the benefit of caller ID; and making calls by dialing numbers from memory because there was no way to use the contact management features the device I had paid for boasted. Whenever tentative steps in the direction of accessibility were made by manufacturers and carriers, publicity about the new features was scanty and difficult to track down. Accessibility was seemingly a word not to be mentioned; marketing was geared toward the "normal" population, and any relevance voice-guidance or voice control might have to a person with any disability was never mentioned. It was as if I, as a paying consumer of cell phone technology and service, was invisible; the companies wanted my money, but they did not market to me with anything approaching the same enthusiasm as characterized their stance toward non-disabled potential customers. I and my compatriots were invisible to the companies who wanted our money and loyalty. And, if we wanted to know how or when the experience might be improving, we would just have to rely on our own community for information, and hope for the best.

I can remember numerous times when, as I entered a store to upgrade my phone or investigate some new accessibility feature offered on the latest (and most expensive) device from Company X, the store employee would have no idea what I was talking about, or even whether such a thing was possible at all. I felt frustrated and dehumanized in some sense because, although I had come to the

store with a wealth of knowledge, prepared to make an informed purchase, I couldn't even receive customer service that acknowledged me as a fully participating member of consumer culture, and I often got the distinct impression that the employee thought I was a bit more than odd. Who had ever heard of a talking cell phone? Couldn't I just get someone to read the screen to me? Or how about having a friend set up my contacts? The most helpful suggestion I heard, and heard often, was to simply memorize the menus; in this way I could enjoy all of my expensive phone's features, provided I had the patience and determination.

When the iPhone emerged, I heard little about its accessibility features. Apple might tout the higher resolution of the iPhone's screen and camera, but features and the ways in which they might make the phone safer and more flexible to use by everyone never pop up in the company's ads. Nevertheless, what I was gleaning from blindness-related email lists was exciting. Full accessibility - included! I would not be expected to shell out money, possibly much more than the cost of the device I owned, in order to use it. This was the first time that I, as a consumer of cell phone technology and service, would participate with almost full equality with my sighted peers in membership in our consumer culture.

I say, "Almost full equality," because even Apple seems reluctant to make too much of their exciting work in the area of meaningful accessibility. On an occasion when I needed some face-to-face technical support, I walked into an Apple store and found that it was the same old story: the tech support specialist I met with, though friendly and eager to solve my problem, had not even known of the built-in access technology standard in all iPhones. Once again, I was in the position of educating tech support about how they could best serve me, the customer.

I am thrilled to say that this experience is the definite exception to the rule concerning my current experiences as a consumer of cellular technology and services. With my iPhone I am able to enjoy equal access to practically all the functions of my iPhone, unless an app has been created by a person who did not take accessibility-related design issues into account. I feel a markedly enhanced sense of belonging and participation in the techno centric aspects of our society and culture. The astonishing variety of apps available to me has literally revolutionized my use of my cell phone and even my lifestyle. I now have an equal ability to access and share information at any time and from any place if that is my choice.

Though apple's iPhone has meant wonderful things for me, its presence in the market should not be seen as solving the problems faced by individuals accessing and sharing information through alternative modalities. It remains the only option I am aware of that is available in the mainstream market offering full and meaningful accessibility on a device that is cutting edge and as mainstream as it is possible to be. However, for issues of equality to be fully addressed, all consumers need to have choice in a free market. Choices need to reflect the market's awareness that consumers

operate at all economic levels. This issue of affordability is particularly apposite in the context of this discussion because, unpleasant as the reality is, unemployment and poverty are exponentially higher in the disabled community. How - and why - should a community whose members make up a substantial percentage of the country's poorest people be faced with the necessity of paying sometimes double or triple the amount already spent on a piece of technology rapidly moving toward necessity status in order to make full use of its potential as a tool in their personal pursuit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

In summary, I strongly urge you to consider ways of ensuring greater awareness on the part of manufacturers and carriers concerning the real-world use and application of accessibility features they might implement. Also, customer service and technical support staff at all levels need to be aware of accessibility-related features and functionality, and have at least a basic understanding that the presence of a disability does not redefine a customer's status in any way. Companies should be encouraged to recognize and explore the various ways in which people access and share information through alternative modalities. Companies need to understand that disability is not a one-size-fits-all paradigm: people with disabilities are individuals whose lifestyles and goals are as varied as those of customers who access and share information in "normal" ways. A phone designed for the needs of senior citizens is not going to be a satisfactory buying option for a college student, or a corporate employee, or an athlete, or a musician. The practice of a token device offering token accessibility, kept well below the radar of marketing buzz so as not to give the device the status of a "special" device for "special" people must be abandoned. We are rapidly becoming a society and culture in which the ability to access and share information at any time and from anywhere is the new standard of viability. To exclude any citizen from taking full advantage of his or her ability to participate in this new paradigm to the fullest extent of his or her choice is to violate the rights of these individuals as citizens.